DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 439 466 CS 510 278

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TITLE Permanent Base Groups in Broadcast Journalism Instruction.
INSTITUTION National Communication Association, Annandale, VA.
PUB DATE 1998-00-00
NOTE 7p.
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://www.natcom.org/ctronline2/98boldoc.htm.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Broadcast Journalism; *Cooperative Learning; Higher Education; Introductory Courses; *Journalism Education; *Small Group Instruction; Student Participation

ABSTRACT

An instructor increases student performance, participation, and motivation in broadcast journalism and other media courses through the base group cooperative learning model. Base groups are a specific form of cooperative learning which enables students to become actively involved in small-group discussions and learning with a permanent group of students. Groups are formed at the beginning of the semester; students with prior experience in a given area are dispersed to avoid "stacking" one group at the expense of the others. In the introductory broadcast journalism course, base groups enable more focused discussion of key concepts. Base groups can also be given writing assignments, the results of which are then shared with the class. Students from other groups are invited to offer constructive criticism of other groups' work. Base group instruction offers a dynamic and productive means of directly involving students in course content, providing experience in cooperative learning, and exposure to a variety of viewpoints. (Contains a list of suggested reading.) (RS)

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CS 510 278

Permanent Base Groups in Broadcast Journalism Instruction

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Goal: To increase student performance, participation, and motivation in broadcast journalism and other media courses through the base group cooperative learning model.

Cooperative Learning

Research indicates that the cooperative learning model, when applied correctly, increases student motivation and achievement, and creates positive interpersonal relationships, self-esteem, and a sense of social cohesion (Brufee, 1993; Johnson & Johnson, 1990; Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1991). Cooperative learning techniques, in which academic assignments are completed by small groups rather than individuals, also add variety to the classroom and develop valuable group skills essential in media professions (Brufee, 1993; Samuelson, 1995).

Base groups are a specific form of cooperative learning which enables students to become actively involved in small-group discussions and learning with a permanent group of students. The base group model provides permanent academic support

groups within a given class and encourages students who might otherwise be intimidated by class-wide discussion to increase their involvement within the familiar environment of their permanent group.

Organizing base groups. At the beginning of each semester, students submit 3"x 5" note cards with their name, phone number, email address, student ID number, hometown and other information related to the course (e.g., past journalism experience, preferred news source, journalism role model, career goals, extra-curricular activities, jobs). To enhance diversity and prevent established cliques from dominating the groups, students are randomly assigned to permanent base groups. Students with prior experience in a given area (e.g., completed a news internship) are systematically dispersed to avoid stacking one group at the expense of the others. While the primary responsibility of the base group is to complete in- and out-of-class assignments together, students are also encouraged to study with their base group and to contact fellow group members following an absence.

Once the cards have been collected and reviewed, students are instructed to convene in their respective groups, exchange information, agree on a common out-of-class meeting time and location, and to choose a group name. The process of brainstorming is explained to initiate the name selection process. Simply choosing a group name seems to stimulate "team atmosphere" within the groups. Students are then instructed to adopt group rules concerning participation, effort, and attendance at group meetings.

Once established, base groups provide an efficient and orderly means of dividing the class into small groups for in-class exercises. In my experience, each group tends to meet in one area of the classroom, further facilitating efficient transition from lecture to group work.

Base groups in the broadcast journalism course for skill enhancement and values clarification.

In the introductory broadcast journalism course, base groups enable more focused discussion of key concepts. Following the professor's lecture and completion of assigned readings, base groups convene to discuss one or more aspects of the topic. Assignments include activities such as the application of news values, ethical case studies, news writing techniques, and management level news decision making (e.g., choosing the stories for the day's newscast). As with most base group activities, each group's solutions are presented to the class and the ensuing discussion helps develop students' understanding of the topic, contributes to their own values clarification, and gives them practice presenting complex issues in front of the class.

Writing exercises for base groups: Following a lecture on a specific broadcast newswriting technique (e.g., word usage, handling numbers, leads), base groups complete a related task in class (e.g., correct a series of poorly written passages or write a story lead given a list of pertinent facts). The groups are instructed to identify problems with the items according to the concepts presented in the related lecture, brainstorm

possible solutions, and then reach consensus on the best solution. The teams' responses are then shared with the class, and students from the other groups are invited to offer constructive criticism. The professor moderates the discussion, providing feedback and guiding the critiques. This process allows students to see how others handled the problems, and the students learn from each other both within and between groups.

Base groups are also used for more substantial projects. Toward the end of the semester, base groups become independent news teams, with team members gathering and preparing news for a mock group newscast.

On occasion, the in-class group assignments are set in a competitive context. Group answers are written on overhead transparencies and shared with the class. Each team's response is rated on a scale of one to five by either the professor, advanced-level guest students, or student teaching assistants. Members of the group receiving the highest overall score receive a modest bonus. Periodically including a competitive assignment contributes to group unity and creates a dynamic means of practicing skills and heightens students' critical skills.

Conclusion

Base group instruction offers a dynamic and productive means of directly involving students in course content, providing experience in cooperative learning, and exposure to a variety of viewpoints. Additionally, it provides an environment in which

students may receive informal peer feedback regarding their writing and conceptual understanding of the course content. The permanent nature of the groups creates an efficient means of conducting group work and tends to increase the "team" atmosphere of the class.

Readings

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